

Human and Organization Studies: The Discipline of HRD

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Human resource development (HRD) has long been considered a field with an interdisciplinary foundation. Unfortunately, there has never been a consensus on the composition of the disciplinary base of HRD. We may have a sense of the purpose of the field; but it still does not lead easily to a sense of the discipline of the field. And it may be that we are thinking of the discipline and the profession of HRD in the same mindset, when there is an alternative perspective. It is proposed that the body of knowledge and teaching that HRD practitioners study to learn about or advance in the field be known by a different label than HRD. Human and Organization Studies (HOS) is described as it exists at one university and a discussion is presented about the need to begin the dialogue about the discipline of HRD.

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Human resource development (HRD) has long been considered a field with an interdisciplinary foundation. Pat Galagan (March, 1986), then editor of *Training & Development*, referred to this issue in an editorial when she described the field:

. . . as an omnivorous discipline, incorporating over the years almost any theory or practice that would serve the goal of learning in the context of work. Like an amoeba, it has ingested and taken nourishment from whatever it deemed expedient in the social and behavioral sciences, in learning theory, and business". Indeed, it is a field that has borrowed heavily over the years from other disciplines, and will continue to do so in order to apply the best of approaches to the learning needs of the workplace (p.4).

Jacobs (Spring, 1990) stated that:

HRD is both an area of professional practice and an emerging interdisciplinary body of academic knowledge. The interrelatedness of these two aspects makes HRD similar to most other applied professions, most of which have emerged to meet some important social or organizational need. After practice is established, the need arises to formalize the knowledge gained in practice into some logical structure. Such activity helps legitimize the profession and increases the reliability of practice (p.66).

Every new occupation seeking professional status has sought to delineate its foundation in terms of its unique body of knowledge. (Jarvis, 1987). HRD, like adult education (which most professionals consider at the least a closely related field), has developed a unique body of knowledge suited to its purposes through two methods;

- 1) Experiences gained from coping with problems of practice lead to the formulation of principles or generalizations which provide guides for future practice.
- 2) Knowledge that has been developed by other disciplines is borrowed and reformulated for use in HRD (Jensen, 1964). HRD, again like adult education, is a practical discipline. "Its primary objective is coping effectively with some unsatisfactory state of affairs or problem of everyday life" (Jensen, 1964).

HRD as a Discipline

Unfortunately, there has never been a consensus on the composition of the disciplinary base of HRD (Swanson, 2001; Kuchinke, 2002). The one agreement that seems to exist is that the foundation of the field is multidisciplinary. After that is noted, there is considerable disagreement as to the disciplines that inform and support HRD. This is largely due to the field's inability to define the concept of HRD.

Recent attempts to define the concept of Human Resource Development (HRD) by academics, researchers, and practitioners are proving frustrating, elusive, and confusing. This suggests that HRD has not established a distinctive conceptual or theoretical identity. The process of defining HRD is frustrated by the apparent lack of boundaries and parameters, elusiveness is created through the lack of depth of empirical evidence of some conceptual aspect of HRD. Confusion also arises over the philosophy, purpose, location, and language of HRD. The [different] epistemological and ontological perspectives of individuals in the HRD area further complicate this (McGoldrick, Stewart, & Watson, 2002, 19).

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For quite a while, the scholarly literature and presentations at academic conferences have reflected three different perspectives that can be characterized as *learning*, *performance*, and *humanistic*. The debate among these different perspectives has at times been heated but has done little to move the field forward in terms of a definition, or philosophy. It is, as Ruona and Lynham (1999, have pointed out,

. . . a conversation having us – that is, . . . a conversation that is ongoing and becomes the prominent focus such that little else actually happens except the having of the conversation. Very few new thoughts are generated, positions are defended, tradition weighs heavy, and very little progress is made in understanding and creating new meaning (p. 215).

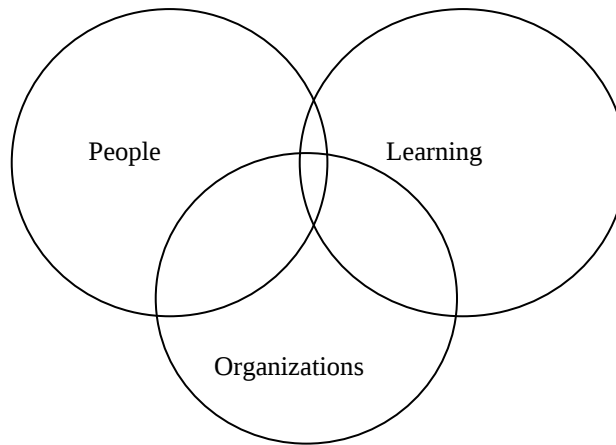
The former editor of HRDI, (Lee, 2001), made the plea for not defining HRD because the act of defining itself is mechanistic/scientific. Instead, she argued that we should seek to establish what HRD should become as it evolves. In actuality, a small group of HRD scholars and practitioners at the 2000 Academy of HRD conference began to analyze the tension and gulf between the perspectives noted above. The goal was to clarify the fundamental values about what HRD should be and to explore if and how these values could be woven together. Once the group started to share what was common among the three perspectives, they were able to articulate a new statement of purpose for HRD that the group believed reflected the synergy of the learning, performance, and humanistic viewpoints: “The purpose of HRD is to enhance learning, human potential, and high performance in work-related system” (p. 205). Watkins (2000), in outlining her key beliefs about HRD, said that, “The aims of HRD are to bring learning and change in an organizational context” (p. 54).

It could be that these conversations, and others, are closer to a unified position than we have been willing to admit. And it could be that this position of purpose can give us a basis for a dialogue on the discipline of HRD. But I believe we have been mistakenly talking about the *discipline* and the *profession* of HRD in the same mindset, when there is an alternative perspective. Someone who desires to be a management consultant studies the various organization behavior and management disciplines, or one studying to be a group therapist learns about group dynamics and psychology. We do not refer to the discipline of consulting or therapy, they are fields of practice. A discipline, as defined by the American Heritage dictionary, is a branch of knowledge or teaching. I am proposing that the body of knowledge and teaching that HRD practitioners study to learn about or advance in the field be known by a different label than HRD.

Human and Organization Studies

A number of years ago in the HRD program at The George Washington University, we began to realize a significant number of people were applying to our doctoral programs who were not HRD/training/adult learning professionals, nor did they have an interest in becoming one. In researching doctoral programs in business, psychology, and education, they felt that the description of our programs gave them the development they needed, which was to learn about “people management”. We began to revise and evolve our curriculum to meet the needs of these students, while still holding fast to the purpose of developing professionals in the HRD field, especially at the masters’ level. Then, at a faculty retreat several years ago, we decided to tackle the issue of our program focus. This led us to the decision that the program should rest on three constructs; people, learning, and organizations (refer to figure 1). While this may seem simplistic, it reflects our commitment to a balance between these areas (as opposed to programs that may lean towards any one area). More recently, we decided that this represented more than a program focus; it represented a discipline, a field of study, and we are in the process of changing the name of our program to represent the discipline; Human and Organization Studies (HOS).

Figure 1. *People, Learning and Organizations*



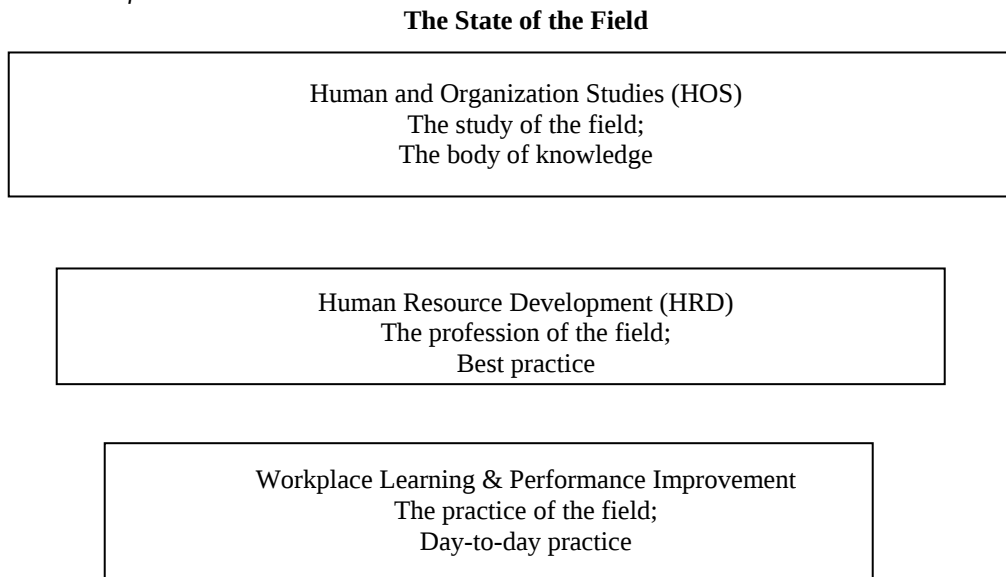
- *People* are the critical resources of any workplace, more so now than ever before. The need for knowledge workers in judgment-based positions that are equipped to provide high quality service to their customers requires a workplace that is supportive and an organizational culture that is empowering. “Organizations don’t change, people change. And then people change organizations.” (Richards, 1996). Students of the discipline need to understand how people work and interact in social systems at individual, group and organizational levels.
- *Learning* needs to be embedded in the culture of the workplace so that the development and growth of management and staff is continually enhanced. Interventions need to be designed to improve effectiveness through systemic change processes and consideration for alternative perspectives. Students of the discipline need to understand learning and change constructs and models that can be applied at individual, group and organizational levels.
- *Organizations* need to be adaptable, humanistic, and ethical. Leadership should be transformational. Structure and work processes should be designed to meet both employees’ and customers’ needs. Students of the discipline need to understand the complexities of organizations as systems and their impact on stakeholders, the community, and the economy, both nationally and globally.
- (Note that the concept of change is embedded in all three constructs.)

These constructs are all interrelated, yet the study of them can involve examining them individually, in pairs, and/or all together. The discipline is multi- and/or inter-disciplinary. It has been and continues to be informed by other related disciplines. These include:

- Sociology (e. g. social systems)
- Anthropology (e.g. culture)
- Psychology (e.g. motivation and behavior)
- Management (e.g. leadership, strategy and structure)
- Education (e.g. learning theory)
- Economics (e.g. human capital)
- Physical Sciences (e.g. systems theory, chaos theory)

Many academic programs include the study of some, all, and/or additional subjects within their curriculum.

What is different with our program is that we are proposing that the discipline is a more encompassing concept than the profession, which in turn is a more encompassing concept than the practice (refer to figure 2).

Figure 2. The State of the Field

Anyone with a need or desire to understand the complex interactions between people, learning, and organizations can come and study the discipline, not just those individuals that are interested in being HRD professionals.

In the 1990's, many academic programs base their curriculums on the role and competency study conducted by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) (McLagen, 1989). The results of this study represented both practice and borrowed theory and knowledge, which is sometimes hard to distinguish because of the mingling of the two over the years. It is important to note that the data collection technique used to arrive at the results was to poll approximately 300 "experts" (as identified by a committee of practitioners and academics) as to what they perceived to be the critical roles and competencies for the HRD field in five years (from the time of the study). This may have been a legitimate form of inquiry for a field in its infancy, but it does not translate into a full-fledged body of knowledge for a professional discipline. There have been little, if any, research to test the experts' perceptions; few attempts to develop theoretical constructs from the data; and almost no scholarly critique and debate of the value of the study beyond its immediate applications (Chalofsky, 1996).

More recently, most programs have based their curriculums on the needs of the local market (employers of HRD professionals) or on the disciplinary base of their "parent" programs (e.g. vocational education or adult education). Kuchinke (2002) studied the curricula of 55 HRD related graduate programs and found that over 75% of the programs covered what I would label practice or professional subjects; instructional design, instructional delivery, and evaluation. (Adult) learning theories was covered by 73%; the next disciplinary subject on the list, organization theory/organization behavior, was covered by only 55%. Only 40% covered psychological dimensions of HRD and only 27% covered economic dimensions of HRD. What this tells me is that the body of knowledge most graduate programs are covering is still based on professional practice. Since the practice of HRD is accepted as a necessity in most organizations, and there is an increasing number of training and consulting firms serving organizations, the focus of most graduate programs has been on preparing professionals to meet the needs of the marketplace.

Since our field is still primarily practice-driven, the body of knowledge studied in most HRD graduate programs has been informed by "reflective theory building" (Mott, 1996). There is nothing wrong with practitioners engaging in reflective theory building that results in expert knowledge for use in practice. And there is nothing wrong with graduate students studying expert knowledge as part of their programs of study. The danger is both what is "expert" knowledge and whether what may work in one context will work equally well in another context (Chalofsky, 1996). Most of what is practiced in the field is still, at best, educated trial and error, and, at least, "the fad of the month". Few organizations or HRD consulting firms conduct research to test new approaches. And the academic research being conducted is still too new to be readily translated into practice. The state of research and

theory building has not had outlets for dissemination until the establishment of the *Human Resource Development Quarterly* and the *Performance Improvement Quarterly* journals. In addition, an association for HRD academics (the HRD Professors Network of ASTD) was established in 1981 but did not seriously begin to promote scholarly work until the Academy for Human Resource Development was formed in 1993. Thus, HRD has not had its own research and theory building guiding and informing best practice; which, in turn, would be guiding and informing day-to-day practice. Instead, we have had practitioners' and consultants' educated opinions and ideas *cloaked as new theories and/or approaches* driving practice.

In essence, the very HRD doctoral programs that are producing the new research and theory that will inform the field should also be anchored with a foundation of seminal theories in related disciplines. This will insure that we are building on what is already known, rather than reinventing the wheel. It also means we will be practicing what we preach; that doctoral students should know the seminal theories and research in their respective specialties within HRD. In addition, research and theory should also be linked with expert knowledge wherever possible in the curriculum.

Conclusion

While our program faculty would advocate this disciplinary framework for all HRD graduate programs, I primarily want to start the dialogue about the basis for a discipline for our field. Eventually, our Academy is going to have to deal with questions of quality control and accreditation. Should the academy have an agreed upon core set of theories for the discipline? Should there be specialty areas within the discipline? Should quality be evaluated on a program's adherence to and coverage of the core theories? These and other questions need to be addressed in the academy at some point in the near future.

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